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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BUCHAREST 001215

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STATE DEPT FOR EUR/NCE - AARON JENSEN

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KCOR](#) [KJUS](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [RO](#)

SUBJECT: STATE TV NEWS EDITOR SANCTIONED FOR REVEALING CORRUPTION

REF: A. A) BUCHAREST 1179

- [¶](#)B. B) BUCHAREST 747
- [¶](#)C. C) BUCHAREST 574
- [¶](#)D. D) BUCHAREST 491
- [¶](#)E. E) BUCHAREST 469

Classified By: Political Counselor Theodore Tanoue for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Press freedoms appear to have been caught in the political backlash against the release of footage of a Romanian Agriculture Minister caught accepting a bribe. Romanian journalists complain of political pressure as the public television editors who broadcast the footage of high-level corruption are replaced. One member of Romania's press oversight board remarked that the footage crossed the line with politicians because it broke the informal first rule in Romanian politics--to protect corruption. End Summary.

[¶](#)2. (C) Romanian Public Television (TVR) News Director Rodica Culcer complained to emboffs during an October 18 meeting that political pressure had prevented her from broadcasting new bribery footage involving Agriculture Minister Remes. She said that since the appointment of Alexandru Sassu as head of TVR, there had been numerous attempts to interfere in editorial matters and that now he was attempting to remove her editorial responsibilities as a sanction for her October 10 decision to release the original footage of Remes apparently accepting a bribe. She also cited public statements from the Prime Minister and Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies that have added to the political pressure against journalists' revealing high-level corruption.

[¶](#)3. (C) Culcer said that TVR general director Alexandru Sassu had told her the morning after she broadcast the groundbreaking images of a government minister apparently taking a bribe that "any journalist would have done the same." She said that by that afternoon, Sassu's comments took a different tone. In an October 11 internal memo, Sassu said broadcasting similar footage casting suspicions on the current and former Agriculture Ministers was "not correct, legal, and opportune." Culcer said Sassu privately told two colleagues on the board of governors that he could not do such a thing to the government when he was asking for money from it. Culcer noted that TVR was indebted 9 million euros due to the former general director's giving away contracts to political contacts, including Liberal-friendly firms. (Note: Culcer also noted that Economy Minister Varujan Vosganian had wanted to start an inquiry into TVR's debts, but was stopped by Deputies Speaker Bogdan Olteanu and Interior Minister Cristian David.) Culcer added that Sassu received for TVR 8 million lei (about 3 million euros) from the government allegedly for technical equipment the following week.

¶ 4. (C) Sassu subsequently appointed Madalina Radulescu as TVR news director on October 16. Culcer described Radulescu as a former editor at Dan Voiculescu's Antena 1 who had never been in charge of a whole news transmission. Culcer said her own position at TVR had yet to be redefined apart from Sassu's public statements of October 15 indicating she would have managerial, rather than editorial, responsibilities. Culcer noted that Sassu did not involve TVR's human resources department in the decision and said she was thinking of suing him if any reorganization was formalized as it was not done according to the rules. On October 22 Radulescu announced the reorganization of the news department, which included the removal of Culcer's editors and producers from the primetime (7pm) newscast.

¶ 5. (C) Culcer claimed Sassu's interference in TVR's editorial affairs began soon after he was appointed, when he had hired Mura Franculescu as his counselor for editorial affairs in September. Culcer said she had already formally complained of Franculescu's editorial interference on two occasions and had succeeded in getting her to back down. Culcer asserted that Radulescu's friendship with Franculescu was the primary reason for Radulescu's appointment as news director.

¶ 6. (C) On October 15, Prime Minister Tariceanu publicly stated: "The manner in which the footage was made shows serious deficiencies with regard to the deontology of those who work for the public television. I think this is regrettable." Culcer questioned how the PM could determine that reporters had broken journalistic rules by choosing to broadcast the images of Remes apparently taking a bribe. She believed the PM was putting pressure on journalists by making such a public statement against them. Another TVR reporter told poloff it had always been the case that the state TV serves the incumbent government's interests. A Romanian

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National Press Agency (Rompres) reporter also told poloff it was usual for the government to assert control over the national press outlets. He said the past two years had been a transition period with unprecedeted press freedom, but now reporters must again censor themselves if they want to succeed professionally.

¶ 7. (SBU) The Helsinki Committee (APADOR-CH) and the Romanian Media Monitoring Agency (MMA) subsequently demanded Sassu's resignation due to his censorship, arguing that any journalist would have broadcast such footage. MMA called it "a very dangerous precedent and a serious political interference in the editorial decision." The Romanian Press Club ruled on October 16 that the public interest justified the broadcast of the footage and considered the internal memo sent by Sassu as "pressure" on the news department. The TVR ethics commission ruled October 22 the decision to broadcast the tape was justified as the images were of public interest, but also that Sassu's decision to ban the broadcast was not censorship, but "a hierarchic communication." The eleven members of the The National Audio-visual Council (CNA) also considered that any journalist would have published such footage and decided to ask Sassu appear before to council to provide an explanation on October 25.

¶ 8. (C) CNA member Gelu Trandafir commented to emboffs in an October 19 meeting that CNA, Romania's radio/TV oversight board (similar to the FCC), also perceived growing political pressures on the media. He said it started when parliament decided Sassu, the former head of PSD's propaganda department, would head TVR and the Liberals would get Razvan Popescu to head the CNA. Trandafir said the 11 CNA members had decided to delay their election of a CNA president, but were pressured through phone calls that included threats to elect him immediately on September 13. He commented, "When the phones are switched off, we're quite independent. But when the big issues are at stake, we find out our clear vote." Trandafir said the political linking of the positions at CNA and TVR made it hard for CNA President Popescu to

sanction TVR's Sassu for his actions against broadcasting the bribery footage.

¶9. (C) Trandafir described TVR as "very independent" during 2005-2007, but said "now there are lots of steps backwards." Trandafir claimed Sassu "blocked without seeing the images -- that is censorship." Trandafir added that Deputies Speaker Bogdan Olteanu also complained on October 15 that a TVR story on the F16 aircraft was blatant "advertising" in favor of the US-made aircraft. Trandafir dismissed the accusation as baseless given the details of the TVR report and explained that this disagreement started at a CNA panel when Olteanu dodged a question by Culcer with that specific attack. Culcer had asked Olteanu, as a Liberal, to explain the banning of opinion polls for a month prior to the European Parliamentary elections. Olteanu responded by attacking TVR for promoting the F16 during a public tender. Trandafir added that Olteanu referred the case to the Deputies' Culture, Arts, and Mass-media Commission, despite CNA's sole authority to judge whether audio-visual rules had been broken.

¶10. (C) Trandafir also noted growing parliamentary unhappiness with the current independence of the electronic media, especially after the bribery footage was broadcast. He said the Remes case was a turning point, as it broke the informal rules to protect corruption, and because the public was able to see the evidence themselves "before a judge was able to quietly dismiss it....Now they (the politicians) are really angry." He added that "most judges are allied with corrupt politicians -- they are there to protect them....The entire system was built up to protect, not to punish." He added that prosecutors have, since 2004, done their job by bringing many high level cases to court, but that the problem now was with the judges.

¶11. (C) Comment: It is no surprise that the current PNL-led government has moved to assert greater control over the electronic media in the run-up to the November 25 European Parliament election given the importance of television in shaping public opinion. One result of the internal personnel moves within TVR is that Romania's public TV station now looks much less like the BBC (Culcer's former employer), and more like the TVR from the Iliescu-Nastase period. As noted in reftel B, the broadcast of bribery footage involving the Agriculture Minister had a devastating effect on the PNL's public image. This was confirmed informally by a senior contact in Basescu's Presidential Office, who noted that a written description and transcript of Remes' comments when accepting the alleged bribe had appeared in the print media days before the footage had been released, but the story had disappeared without a trace until the leaked surveillance

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tape was broadcast. The pressures experienced by the media coincide with increased pressures on other fronts, including recent heavy-handed attempts by the Justice Minister to weaken the independence of anti-corruption prosecutors and complaints from Freedom House of growing harassment from judicial and tax authorities (ref A). End Comment.  
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